

TV Movie on Dr. King Rekindles Rancor Between Widow and Aides

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ATLANTA, Aug. 27—The production of a television movie about the life of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. has stirred an acrimonious debate about the slain civil rights leader's character and his place in history.

The film, to be shown in two prime-time segments early next year by NBC, has rekindled smoldering animosities between Dr. King's widow, Coretta, and aides who took over the Southern Christian Leadership Conference when he was assassinated in Memphis in 1968.

They differ over whether the movie accurately depicts Dr. King, themselves and the Atlanta-based conference, the main spearhead of the historic drive for racial equality. They also are at odds once again over whether Dr. King's legacy should be carried forward by the conference, now disorganized and desperately short of funds, or by the Center for Social Change that Mrs. King is building in downtown Atlanta next to her husband's tomb.

Film's Script Read

Conference officials who have read the film's script contend that it gives them and their organization short shrift and presents Dr. King as weak and somewhat manipulated by liberal whites from the North. Some officials have threatened to boycott the movie's sponsors, not yet signed up, and to go to court to win compensation for being portrayed in a film.

"The film is a distortion of history," says the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy, the man who succeeded Dr. King as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. "It's not about the Martin I was with all the way from Montgomery to Memphis."

"How could it be," Mr. Abernathy con-

tinued, "when it plays up the role of a white like Mr. Stan Levison, who was way in the background raising some funds, and totally ignores—not a line—the role of a black like Hosea Williams, who led more marches than I can remember. Mrs. King should put a stop to this."

Mrs. King strongly disagrees. She argues that the movie is a "docu-drama" that takes some dramatic license but nevertheless is a faithful portrait of a man and a movement.

Egos Can Get Bruised

"You have to be selective of events and people when you're compressing 16 years into five or six hours," she said. "Egos can get bruised. But I'm satisfied. I've read the whole script. My husband is presented as a strong and noble man. This whole dispute is the result of some unnecessary competitive spirit."

Mrs. King said she would be compensated personally by the film's makers and would also be given money for the Center for Social Change. She would not disclose how much.

Mr. Abernathy, who recently was succeeded as president of the conference by the Rev. Joseph Lowery, said that it had been promised no money by the movie's makers. "Other organizations will benefit, not the conference," he added.

The script for the film, entitled "King," was written by Abby Mann, a friend of the King family who is a movie dramatist with an Oscar for "Judgment at Nuremberg." The main actors in the film are Paul Winfield as Dr. King, Cicely Tyson as Mrs. King and Ossie Davis as the Rev. Martin Luther King Sr.

NBC has not made the script public. Nor has the network released production costs.

"We're just saying that we are going to have a superb drama," George Hoover,

a network spokesman, said. "The script satisfies our legal department and Mrs. King."

Mr. Mann said that he and Dr. King discussed the outline of a biographical movie a number of times before the Memphis shooting.

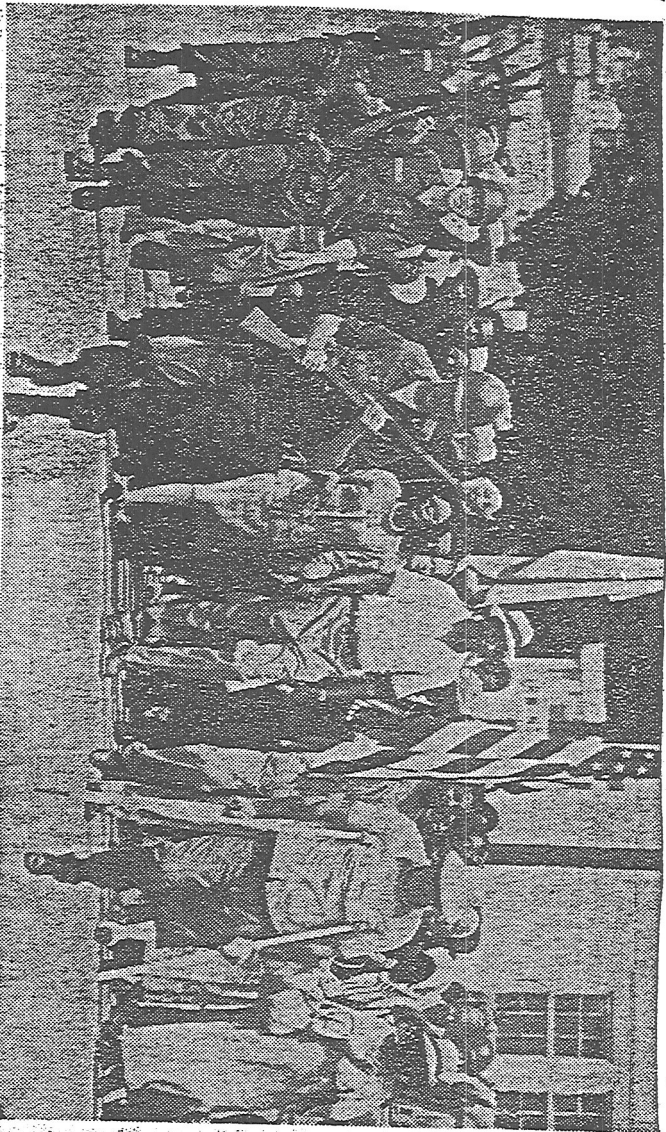
"I know what he wanted," Mr. Mann continued. "I also got great help from Ambassador Andrew Young, who was one of Dr. King's very closest aides. Those who say that I make Dr. King look weak will have their words come back to haunt them."

Mr. Mann said that he used some characters more than others in the script because he wanted to "illuminate" vari-

ous sides of Dr. King. "The theme of the film," he added, "is that a man who wishes to carry out Christian doctrine, the most dangerous thing in the world, is destroyed."

The film is now in the cutting stage, most of the action having been shot earlier this summer. Many of the scenes were filmed in Atlanta or in Macon, Ga., 75 miles to the south.

At one point in the Macon shooting, several members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference got into a shouting match with film officials. Some curses and racial epithets were heard, and for a moment or two it appeared that a movie about nonviolent protests



Paul Winfield, at center with white shirt and hat, playing the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.; next to Cicely Tyson as Coretta King in recreation of march through Selma, Ala. Photograph made during filming of television biography.

might produce a violent protest or two. More recently, Hosed Williams asserted that the film was being produced by a "rich clique of New York Jews" who, he asserted, were trying to "exploit the life of Dr. King for economic gain." That assertion, Stan Levison countered, amounted to "slander." He said Mr. Wilkins did not "come up to the knees" of other civil rights leaders. Mann said at the end of the week, Mr. Mann said he would be willing to meet with conference officials to discuss the film. "But not going to be pressured or blackmailed," he added.

NBC spokesman said, however, that negotiations were planned.